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# RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

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## VI. APOCALYPTICISM

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*With this article PROFESSOR CROSS completes his survey of "Rival Interpretations of Christianity." The value of the series has been apparent to all readers. The current tendency to interest in apocalyptic forecast of the future will make this particular article of immediate value.*

It is related in the Gospel of Mark that at a critical point in his career "Jesus asked his disciples, saying unto them, Who do men say that I am? And they told him, saying, John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but others, One of the prophets. And he asked them, But who say ye that I am? Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Messiah" (Greek, Christ).

These are momentous words, for they record the first historic confession of the Christian faith. It seems to have risen spontaneously to the lips of the disciple when the Master's great question was asked and he spoke with the evident assurance that he was uttering the conviction that bound him and his companions together in a common allegiance and a common hope. Here, therefore, we date the beginning of the Christian religion. Here, for the first time, the followers of the Nazarene were consciously differentiated from the rest of men by their unanimous trust in his mission. Here, too, for the first time, Jesus was placed outside the category of common men, even of the highest and

best of them, and assigned a unique place in the world. What, more precisely, that place should be was as yet vaguely conceived in the minds of his followers. The colloquy that follows Peter's confession reflects a clash of ideas on the subject among his disciples from the outset. The controversy about him that has continued for centuries was then at its beginning, and the end of it is not even yet in sight.

Among the many Christian confessions that rise up as way-marks along the road of Christian history, Peter's confession enjoys a pre-eminence, and that for a better reason than its priority in time. For it has always been and still remains the most popular of them all. In this stock confession of Christendom subject and predicate have become so closely united that the two words, Jesus and Christ, regularly stand together as a single personal name. Moreover, this confession is the parent of all the others. For they are all enlargements or modifications of it and they indicate the manner in which faith in the messiahship of Jesus has infused

a new meaning into beliefs that arose at first independently of it. We can say—for we see it now as it was impossible for those early disciples to see it—that the Petrine confession marked the rise of a new religion among men. It did not seem so, I say, at the time. For to say that Jesus was the Christ seemed at first simply to say that through him was to come the realization of the Jewish hope. But the actual outcome was vastly different from what anyone could have anticipated. For it was only a little while before the new faith found itself in violent conflict with the Judaism out of whose bosom it sprang. A dramatic account of that conflict appears in the early chapters of the Acts and is reflected by anticipation, as it were, upon the accounts of Jesus' career. The root of the controversy lay in the question whether the faith in Jesus did not represent the true Judaism. And now, after the lapse of all the intervening centuries, it is still an open question whether, after all, it was not misleading to call Jesus the Christ. Did not Peter's confession introduce into the minds of Jesus' followers a misconception of the character and purpose of Jesus? In assigning to him the purpose of the Jewish Messiah did it not pervert his true aim and theirs? And has not the Christian faith been burdened with beliefs in consequence from which it still seeks relief? This is in part the subject of our present discussion.

The significance of the primitive confession that Jesus was the Messiah is to be perceived only by reference to the whole circle of ideas to which the term belongs. For the story of the origin and development of Jewish Messianism

the reader must be referred to the works of specialists to whom of late we owe a great increment of knowledge on the subject. It is not possible in the present connection to do more than indicate in a general manner the conditions and conceptions out of which it sprang. Jewish Messianism is a prominent feature of a specifically Jewish philosophy which men have called Apocalypticism. Jewish Apocalypticism is a modification, under the influence of the Jewish religious spirit, of a widespread, if not universal, oriental philosophy of the universe and of human life. The character of this philosophy we shall expound more fully presently. The thing we wish to point out just now is that the effect of the adoption by Jesus' followers of Peter's confession was to carry Jewish Messianism over into the new Christian community and thereby bring the minds of Christians so directly under the power of Jewish Apocalypticism that it became naturalized in their interpretation of their new faith. That is to say, Christians found, first of all, in the formulas of Jewish Apocalypticism a body of ideas by which they were enabled to express to themselves and to others the significance and worth of the personality and career of Jesus. Christian Apocalypticism is a Jewish heritage. The conceptions by which the religious Jew was wont to set forth his hopes for the future were transferred to the Christian mind and became the instruments of its self-expression. This was quite natural at a time when the great body of believers in Jesus came of Jewish stock. But the union of Christian faith and Jewish philosophy, which was so natural to men of the pharisaic type of

mind, has continued to the present day when the naturalness of it is no longer clear. We shall see that, like so many other marriages, it has been both for better and for worse. Its fruit is mingled evil and good.

On the other hand, the fact that conceptions that were formerly distinctively Jewish have obtained a powerful hold on many other peoples and races and have maintained their hold on them for long centuries creates a presumption that these conceptions must have belonged originally to mankind at large or, at least, have borne such a likeness to prevailing conceptions among other peoples that the transition from one to the other must have been easy and natural. The comparative study of religions has confirmed the presumption. We were formerly trained so thoroughly in the belief that the Jews were most especially a people separate from all others that we forgot they were the natural heirs of ecumenical traditions. The Jews were but a single branch of the Israelitish people, the Israelites of the Hebrews, the Hebrews of the Semites, and the Semites of the stock of that ancient humanity whose story has been mostly lost to us. The Jews were, therefore, the natural heirs of the traditions of many races, whatever traditions they may have had that were peculiarly their own. Their likeness to the common Semitic stock, at least, was much more marked than their unlikeness. Then, too, their geographical location in Palestine, that ancient battle-ground of many mighty peoples, brought them into close contact with the great complex of experiences and ideas that constituted the culture of the ancient world. Their

acquisitiveness as a people, combined with their individuality, enabled them to stamp the traditions that had flowed down to them from many sources with their own distinctive characteristics. This inheritance of theirs became woven through and through with their monotheism and their highly moral conceptions of the nature of the Deity and of man's relation to him and then, through the dispersion of the Jews, was given to the world. This position is thoroughly confirmed by the critical study of the Jewish scriptures and the recovery of the knowledge of ancient mythology. It may not be possible to disentangle completely the different strands that have been woven into the Jewish scriptures, yet it is perfectly plain to the discriminating student that much of the folklore and mythology that belonged to other nations recurs in the Old Testament, but has been transformed there by the higher spirit that was given to the Jews.

Now the striking thing about the traditions of primitive culture is the similarity of the main strands of their folklore and their myths even when the various peoples concerned were far separated in time and distance and without apparent contact with one another. The peoples that were able to establish stable governments over large territories and to secure the safety essential to the growth of the higher forms of culture wrought up these primitive stories into literary and philosophic forms but did not obliterate their original features, so that the link of connection between the cruder and the finer culture of antiquity has been preserved. Their underlying unity is dis-

cernible. The general themes of these ancient constructive efforts of the human mind are the same everywhere. They all reflect in highly dramatic and realistic form the effect produced upon the human mind by the constant struggle with the powers of material existence. They tell the story of the destructive fury of malignant forces that assail men and also the story of deliverance from these foes. Their interest was not so very different from the interest with which we today pursue our study of the world and of man, namely, the aim to realize the highest well-being. But the place which is taken by abstract ideas in our present philosophies was occupied by realistic, semi-personal creations of the ancient mind. In what we are pleased to call—in less marked anthropomorphic form—the impersonal forces of nature, men of old saw the operations of living beings. What we *figuratively* describe as the battle of the elements they regarded as the actual encounters of real animate existences possessed of passions like ours. Whether we turn to the mythology of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Iranians, Indians, or Greeks, the interest is the same, namely, the framing of an account of the origin of the woes and the blessings of men through the operations of what we call, somewhat blankly, “nature,” but they, in part, personalized.

These mythologies present three outstanding features in common: First of all, prominence is given to the material forces against which men seem to have struggled so often in vain—stormy seas, raging floods, torrential rains, earthquakes, and fires. These forces working harm to hapless men are viewed as

great monsters of transcendent might, say, a great dragon or a serpent in the deep or in the sky. Sometimes by a fusion of traditions these monsters were multiplied. Secondly, human experiences of deliverance from these baneful forces are pictured as the beneficent deeds of some great hero, generally more distinctly human in form than were these dangerous beings, but still superhuman. These saviors of men throttle and subdue the evil powers and rescue men from sufferings and calamities by a higher control of cosmic forces. Thirdly, there was a representation of a Golden Age in the distant past when men were without their present trials, and for the return of that age they fondly hoped. Perhaps we should say that this was not so much a memory of the past as an anticipation of the future reflected upon the past and held as a ground of encouragement for the future.

Here is a pictorial philosophy so widespread among the ancients that it seems to be native to men. It constitutes a view of things that is both a cosmic philosophy and a philosophy of salvation. It sets forth the three main forms of experience in which men become aware of their universal kinship. First, the sufferings and misfortunes are due to forces too mighty for them to master or control unaided. Second, there is deliverance from these trials through intervention from on high, and with this goes the sense of dependence on a Savior-friend. Finally, there is the hope of an ideal state to come, but founded from the beginning of human life—a heaven, a paradise. These three features are found, indeed, in all religions and they remind us that there never has

been, as there never can be, a religion that does not embrace in the end a philosophy of all being.

What has all this to do with Peter's confession that Jesus was the Messiah? Much in every way, but principally because in effect the confession connected the career of Jesus hopefully with those universal human feelings of need and longing for deliverance of which we have spoken, and because it made him personally the bearer of that deliverance. It placed Jesus, in effect, at the very heart of all the distracting problems that press for human solution and declared that he could supply the answer to them. To be sure, Peter could scarcely have been even dimly aware of this at the time. The confession was purely Jewish in its conscious purport. It pronounced Jesus a purely Jewish deliverer, and the disciples were very slow to perceive afterward a larger meaning in their faith, but none the less it prepared the way for the universalization of the Christian faith, because the Jewish messianic hope was the universal human hope intensified, purified, and exalted through the peculiar experiences of the Jewish people. A few words must now be said in further explanation and justification of this statement.

### **I. The Origin of Jewish Apocalypticism**

It was suggested above that in the earlier stages of their life as a people the Israelites were so much like to the surrounding peoples in character that it would be difficult to distinguish the qualities that made them excel. But in course of time, under the leadership of those men of deep moral insight and

moral vision we call the prophets, they grew to be a nation enjoying as their distinctive dignity the consciousness of a relation to their God fundamentally different from that relation which other peoples conceived they bore to their gods. For while the popular view of the relation between the peoples and their gods was that of consanguinity or physical kinship, and while this inevitably involved the god in each case in the fate of his people, in the view of the prophets the national existence of Israel was based upon a mutual covenant between him and them to which, in the end, every individual Israelite was a partner. Thus the basis of their national life was moral rather than physical, because the covenant-relation is established by an act of choice rather than by physical necessity. This also made the continuance of their God Jahwe's protection of them dependent on their obedience to the terms of that covenant. Out of this relation arises the idea of law. It is quite in keeping with this whole conception that the prophets should constantly insist that the test of all action, both national and personal, was found in the law of their God, and that their well-being depended on their obedience to it. To attempt to trace the effects of this belief upon the spiritual life of the whole nation would carry us too far afield for our present purposes, but it is easy to understand how from this point of view there grew up in the minds of the people the conviction of the superiority of their God to all other gods and at the same time the sense of their own superiority to other peoples. The corollary of such a conviction is the persuasion of their own indestructibility as a people. Other peoples might

perish, but they could not because their God was above all gods. It was this belief that bore them up in their times of fearful struggle with nations or empires of far greater material power than they, and that gave them confidence that they should survive all defeats and be more than conquerors in the end. It was in support of this confidence that the prophets reinterpreted the popular lore of the race from the earliest ages with a view to showing that the course of the entire human race and of the material world from the beginning was directed in conformity with the purpose of God to select Israel as a people for himself and to give them ultimate supremacy over all others. With this object in mind they continually offered forecasts of a day of deliverance and triumph to come.

The eyes of the prophets were therefore upon the future. For them the true golden age, even if at times they did idealize the past, was yet to come. It seems that the people were fond of speaking of the coming "Day of Jahwe" when he should triumph for them over their enemies and his. The prophets were able to impart a profoundly moral character to this prospect. Their predictions of blessing for Israel in that day were interspersed with warnings; for while, as the people thought, it was to be a day of judgment on all nations, it was not less to be a day of judgment for Israel as well. It would bring retribution for the wicked as well as reward for the righteous. And that meant that there was to be a distinction made within Israel as truly as a distinction between Israel and other peoples. Indeed, in some prophetic utterances the principle of righteous judgment seems to be ap-

plied indiscriminately as respects the different nations. Thus there rose up in the prophetic mind the overpowering conception of a great Judgment Day for the vindication of righteousness among all men—one of the great spiritual gifts of Israel to the world.

It might be expected that the successive overthrow of the northern and southern kingdoms of the Israelitish people, their captivity in foreign lands, their pitiable weakness on the economic side, and their political hopelessness would strain their fundamental conviction to the breaking-point. That they survived their downfall, that in the minds of many of the people of Judah their sense of moral superiority remained unimpaired, and their confidence in the ultimate salvation of the righteous stood firm, is one of the miracles of history. The effect of their bitter experiences was to intensify the confidence of the pious Jew in the power of his God. The darker their material and political outlook, the more fervent became their religious faith and hope. The Day of Jahwe would most surely come, but the deliverance it would bring should not be accomplished by the sword of Judah, but by the irresistible intervention of their God from on high. The day of judgment upon mankind should be a day of salvation for the suffering righteous.

It is evident that the misfortunes of these people occasioned a vast revolution in their religion. The destruction of the monarchy upon which the prophets had devoted so much of their energy in an attempt to keep the kings true to the higher faith, the obliteration of the political state, the exile from the land that they called the land of Jahwe, the ruination of their sanctuaries and of the

worship there, led to a spiritualization of their religious belief; the contact with Babylonian and Persian civilization broadened their horizon. A new world on high was opened to the eye of their imagination, and a vaster world on the earth spread before them. And consequently a new destiny lay beyond. Their God no longer dwelt in the temple made with hands or even in the land of Palestine but in the high heaven above them. They learned from Babylon and Persia to people that heaven with exalted beings whose nature was suited to the invisible better world, and whose business it was to act as the messengers of the unseen God and carry out his decrees on earth. All the so-called gods were no gods at all. The evident hopelessness of a struggle with the mighty empires whose power was made manifest to them every day, and the fading character of all material prosperity turned their minds to the heaven. There the pious Jew fixed his gaze and while the hope of a restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel still lingered, the progress of events tended to give to this earthly kingdom more and more a miraculous character while it should last; but it came to be conceived by many a Jew as having only a limited duration and as destined to give place to a kingdom in the heaven that should last forever.

A new interest was henceforth taken in the present and future state of the dead. The old view that all men went to one place and met the same fate and that the present life was the scene of all punishment and reward passed with the passing of confidence in the perpetuity and worth of a political kingdom on earth and the rise into prominence of the distinction of righteous and

unrighteous within the nation. The righteous must have a place in the new kingdom. If that kingdom was to be ushered in by a judgment then there must be a judgment, for the dead as well as for the living. The idea of a resurrection of the dead came as a consolation to those who contended for the supremacy of righteousness; and with this the old idea of sheol, as the final abode of all indiscriminately, gave way. Sheol could no longer be a place of hopelessness for all, or if sheol was the place of the wicked there must be another abode for the righteous, though it was difficult to say where it should be before the resurrection. With this new interest in the dead arose many speculations and guesses about the unseen regions. There was no unanimity of opinion. But new regions began to appear—heaven, paradise, sheol, gehenna, were distinguished, but their relations were obscure. Whether there was to be a resurrection of all the dead for judgment or a resurrection of the righteous only was uncertain. With the incoming of Greek influence came a doubt of the reality or value of any resurrection or of any material kingdom. There was a tendency to spiritualize everything and to fix attention upon the hope of a life eternal in a purely spiritual world; but this view was probably that of the few. Yet amid all the differences of speculation there stood out clearly the firm belief in a coming universal judgment and end of the world. The latter was usually conceived as ushered in by a fire which should destroy the present order of things and the wicked with it.

There is one feature in this development of the Jewish religious spirit that



claims our special interest, namely, the expectation of the coming of a King-Messiah. In the earlier prophetic delineations of the glory of the coming kingdom there appeared from time to time pictures of an ideal king through whom their God would establish the power and prosperity of his people. The destruction of the two kingdoms and the subsequent exile rendered the fulfilment of the prophetic hope a physical impossibility. The nationalism of which the prophets were the spokesmen gradually faded away with the experiences of the captivity. It became to a large extent unnecessary. For the nationalism of the prophets was too narrow for those who gained the universalistic outlook upon the world and the spiritual interpretation of things that came through contact with the larger Gentile views of existence. A great modification of the messianic expectation became necessary if it was to survive and minister to the religious life of men. The Messiah must take on a character in keeping with the new views of the world and of salvation. A mere son of David could never fulfil the functions of a Judge of all mankind and of the Ruler of a kingdom that came from heaven. He must be a heavenly being and, like the kingdom, must also descend from heaven to earth. Would he not live and reign forever? But here again there was much confusion. The old and the new mingled as the new seers sought to connect their new views with the old prophetic declarations. Sometimes the temporal kingdom receives no recognition whatever but all is heavenly. The Messiah of such a kingdom would be a

heavenly and eternal being. At one time (in Second Enoch) it is said the kingdom will last a thousand years, or again (in Fourth Esdras) that it will last four hundred years—corresponding to the four hundred years in Egypt—but Messiah was to die at the close. Sometimes the expectation of a Messiah is entirely wanting, and Jahwe himself is the immediate deliverer of his people and Judge of the world. Messiah is at one time a mighty monarch ruling all nations in righteousness, and again he is a co-sufferer with his people. Thus nationalism and universalism, materialism and spiritualism, were mingled in the postexilic life of the Jews, and the minds of the people were divided.

In this rude survey of the spiritual development of the Jewish people we have covered many centuries and reached the times of Jesus himself. The advent of Jesus and his message to the world, directly or through his disciples, were contemporary with the later phases of this evolution. While, therefore, Peter's confession that Jesus was Messiah connects Jesus with the ideas outlined above, it does not determine which of these various and conflicting views of the character of the coming kingdom, of the manner of its establishment, and of the end of the world were uppermost or even present in the minds of his followers. This much, however, is plain—that the new faith obtained the formulas of its expression through the conceptions whose development we have sought to outline. We shall now attempt to state why we have described this view of things by the term Apocalypticism.

*[To be concluded]*